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ABSTRACT

Results of several studies focusing on relationships between ability grouping and academic achievement are briefly reviewed. Some of the studies reviewed address related issues, such as equal educational opportunity, the artificial social order within the schools, student morale, student perception of group membership, personality variables, and teacher responses to ability grouping. (RH)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ABILITY GROUPING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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Review of Related Literature

Ducharme (1982) proposed four elements in secondary schools that make educational change difficult: 1) the presence of a unified faculty representing academic disciplines; 2) the students in the college - bound track for whom the curriculum is designed; 3) the sweathogs or delinquents in the general track; and 4) the parents who want to maintain their children in a safe environment.

In a survey of more than 2,000 secondary schools, Doe (1978) found that basic skills in reading and math are just as good in unstreamed schools as in those using ability grouping and that exam entries in mixed - ability schools are often higher.

Also, in 1978, Fogelman, et al. examined the relationship between ability - grouping policies in British secondary schools and: 1) pupils' reading and mathematics attainment at age 16 and 2) prospective public examination entries. No significant relationship was found between ability - grouping policy and scores, but there was an indication that mixed - ability schools enter their lower - ability pupils for more public examinations.

In an experiment in 1970, Schrank provided a basis for the acceptance or rejection of the null hypothesis: The academic achievement of higher ability - labeled randomly grouped pupils will not be greater than that

of randomly grouped pupils with lower ability - level lables. The results of the study gave little evidence of the operation of the labeling effect. Scrank concluded his experiment by stating,

> It is very likely that the labeling effect results from an interrelated set of teacher and pupil role perceptions and their reaction to these perceptions. (p. 360).

Further investigation on the subject was conducted by D. cetre and St. Pierre (1977), who collected data during the Anchor Test Study. According to the study, ability grouping and class size were not related to reading proficiency.

However, in a recent review of the tracking literature it is noted that selected categories of students (e.g., low - income, black, and other disadvantaged students) are disproportionately assigned to the non - academic tracks. Contrary to these observations, the data did not exhibit any apparent biases with respect to how students have been assigned to the clearly - defined tracks that exist in the high school under study. Neither father's occupation nor race was significantly associated with track position, according to Kelly (1976).

Nachmias (1980) showed through his study that in urban schools in Israel, socioeconomic origin clearly facilitates educational opportunities by pro -

viding access to academic curriculum. However, the social class bias does not operate independently of differential achievement. The principal determinants of curriculum assignment are early ability and performance. It is clear from the study that students of Oriental origin are assigned to vocational tracks, even though some of them qualify for placement in the academic track.

The findings for the urban sample lend some support to the critics of tracking who argue that students in vocational curriculum are denied access to motivated students and to an environment supportive of academic endeavors. They are looked upon as inferior, suffer from low self - esteem, and fail to develop orientations which will enable them to achieve their potential.

Davis and Huller (1981) in their study concluded that fifty - six percent of the students were tracked according to their original choices. When there was evidence of school interference, more pupils were moved into higher tracks than the ones they chose for themselves, rather than the reverse. Aspiration was the single most important determinant of initial choice. The data did not indicate that socioeconomic status has much to do with the discrepancies between initial choice and actual track placement. The data indicated that final placement in the college

track is explained primarily by ability. The data did, however, indicate that lower - class pupils who elect the vocational track may be allowed to remain there, while middle - class ones who made the same choice may be counseled to raise their aspirations.

By citing other articles, Lefkowitz (1972) arrived at several reasons for not grouping by ability. Some of these were: 1) grouping is an undemocratic practice; 2) grouping deprives many students of their opportunity for equality; 3) the effect of group "labeling" is prejudicial to students in their relationship with teachers; 4) individualized instruction eliminates the need for grouping; and 5) there can never be true homogeneity in schools.

A study by Finley and Bryan (1971) indicated that ability grouping has no favorable effect on over - all pupil learning of academic material. The same study investigated the effect of grouping on children's affective development and concluded that the impact is unfavorable.

Halsermann (1976) indicated that ability grouping not only is unfavorable, but that it is actually deleterious. He further concluded that homogeneous grouping has negative effects on the learning of pupils assigned

to "low ability" groups, that grouping is done by socioeconomic class rather than ability, and that grouping locks pupils into a pattern of non - achievement.

Skinner (1958) opposed the separation of schools into homogeneous classes. He came to that conclusion for the following reasons: 1) Homo - geneous grouping isolated the bright and stigmatized the dull; 2) Group - ing fostered antidemocratic attitudes; 3) Grouping reduced opportun - ities for leadership among the bright; and 4) Grouping deprived average students of the stimulation provided by the bright.

Based on observations and conclusions such as Jones, et al., Schaefer and Olexa, Kelly (1973) concluded that the track systme poses an "important barrier to equal educational opportunity to lower income and black students."

According to Ogletree and Ujiaki (1971), the school is an artificial social order even if classes are not homogeneously grouped. "Any attempt at homogeneous grouping must, therefore, be still a more unnatural and rigid social structure which further splits the psycho - social gap between primary and secondary group roles." After citing research from past studies (Havinghurst, Sexton, Johnson, Scrbin, Mead), they concluded that until a more effective and realistic program is devised and the needs of the

student met, the present situation will only create havoc to the educational process.

After reviewing numerous research studies, Roye (1971) decided that ability grouping was a questionable practice. He concluded from the data that grouping on the basis of standardized measures of achievement on aptitude tends to systematically separate children along ethnic and socio - economic classes.

Further studies by Barr and Johnson (1964) showed that students who were grouped homogeneously experienced a reduction in morale. Their studies showed that lo - status members became hostile and agressive.

Goldberg, Passau, and Justman (1966) concluded that pupils of relatively low ability would achieve successfully in classes where expectations are high and suggested that teachers generally underestimate the capabilities of pupils in lower ability classes. Teachers expect less of them: therefore pupils learn less.

In a study by Schluck (1977) students' perception of group membership was found to affect their performance on a test of reading achievement. Data revealed that those students who believed that they had been placed in a high ability group scored better on the achievement test, thought

their first - grade ranking with regard to reading ability was higher, and adjusted their expectations of the effects of new instructional techniques to reflect a positive attitude. Conversely, students who thought that they were in the low group had poorer reading test scores, remembered their first - grade ranking as lower, and expected to do less well in future reading work. Even with extra instruction, the group with low perceptions of ability scored lower than the other two groups.

DuCette (1971) attempted to show an interaction over time between ability grouping and personality variables. The author concluded that ability grouping did interact with personality and level of aspiration in relationship to grade level and relative to the students in the upper track, lower track students experienced a reduction in level of aspiration over time.

Bella (1963) believed that homogeneous grouping reduced the teacher's desire to deal with individual differences among students. Once the group was divided, it was Dr. Bell's contention that teachers no longer concern themselves with the differences that exist.

Aspy (1970) also denounced ability grouping on the premise that:

> Once we have people lined up according to one trait in homogeneous grouping, they get all out of order for a second dimension. (p.307).

He cited the research findings of Crispin from Indiana State University and Landsman from the University of Florida for his authorities. After reviewing several articles by Heger, Sheehy, Schwebel, Olson, Wattenberg, Lecky and Rosenthal, Aspy feels that some grouping for "teachability" is necessary, but he suggests the following points be employed in the organization: 1) local schools must decide the most effective criteria for grouping its students; 2) individual progress of a student must be continually evaluated; 3) flexible change based on realistic assessments of student needs and student growth should be characteristic of the entire school; and 4) the professional staff should be in the process of growing personally and professionally.

Another study that investigated certain aspects of teacher behavior when teaching at two different ability levels was conducted by Pfeiffer (1967). Eleventh - grade English teachers teaching classes of two different levels of ability were the subjects and Flanders' Interaction Analysis and Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain were the measuring instruments. The results of the study showed that teachers did not differentiate their patterns of teacher - pupil verbal interactions in classes of different levels of ability.

The Rosenthal and Jacobsen study (1968) of the effect of teacher expectations and student performance was conducted by Tuckman (1971). Three hundred and twenty - one black high school and junior high school students in a suburban - city school system were arbritarily moved to the next higher ability group, while 384 comparable students were retained in their assigned groups as controls. The experiment was based upon two general hypotheses: 1) black students reassigned to higher groups perform better on standardized tests and receive higher grouping recommendations than those not assigned to higher groups; 2) students to whose classes the experimentals were assigned perform no differently than students who do not have student experimentals placed with them. Of those moved up, fifty - four percent were subsequently recommended by their teachers for the higher group as compared to one percent of the controls. Experimentals also achieved higher scores on standardized achievement tests.

Being aware of the advisability of considering all pertinent factors when grouping, Bent and McCann (1960) cautioned teachers to be aware of the limitations of grouping and encouraged teachers to provide continuing measures to retain the advantages of grouping.

The findings of the review of literature as to the effect of the ability-grouping on academic achievement are inconclusive. To understand the full impact of track systems, both upon individuals as well as groups, refined studies need to be conducted with diverse populations over an extended period of time. If, as recent research suggests, track systems are producing detrimental effects upon students, then alternative educational strategies should be developed and examined in further detail.

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